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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 YEREVAN 000228

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/CARC, NSC FOR MARIA GERMANO

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL ASEC KDEM KJUS AM

SUBJECT: GOAM'S SPIN CYCLE UNDER STATE OF EMERGENCY

REF: A) YEREVAN 202 B) YEREVAN 213 C) YEREVAN 214

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Classified By: CDA JOSEPH PENNINGTON, REASONS 1.4 (B/D)

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SUMMARY  
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¶11. (C) The suspension of independent media in Armenia following the March 1 imposition of a State of Emergency has allowed the GOAM to construct its own narrative of recent events without the inconvenience of opposition challenge or independent scrutiny. Not surprisingly, the GOAM has used this opportunity to justify the necessity of its fatal crackdown on demonstrations while placing blame for the events on the opposition and its supporters. Any assertions made by the GOAM prior to the unconditional lifting of media restrictions and the permitting of independent reporting and investigations should be viewed with extreme skepticism. END SUMMARY.

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LIE ABOUT A LITTLE THING, LIE ABOUT A BIG THING  
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¶12. (C) The GOAM began trying to influence perception of events through misleading statements even before the March 1 crackdown on demonstrations at Freedom Square. On February 29, responding to a request from the MediaMax news service, Armenian police estimated the crowd sizes at the opposition rallies at Freedom Square at 8,000 on February 27, 7,000 on February 28 and 6,200 on February 29. EmbOffs were in attendance every day at these rallies, and every day attendance clearly peaked at 30,000 or more. (Note: Kocharian also insisted to DAS Bryza March 7 that there were never more than 12,000 persons at Freedom Square. End Note). The GOAM's practice of making false statements about such easily-refuted facts and events should provoke considerable skepticism about its other assertions.

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THE NUMBERS KILLED  
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¶13. (C) The GOAM has consistently reported the official death toll from the crackdown at eight, while opposition supporters have claimed a death toll closer to 50. Thus far it has not been possible to obtain independent information about the actual number, though some Western news reports and visiting officials have already begun to repeat the eight fatalities as established fact. We have heard reports, however, that

families of persons killed in the crackdown have in some cases been forced to sign death certificates with falsified dates of death in order to retrieve their relatives' remains.

SOLDIERS INJURED WHILE MERELY OBSERVING CRACKDOWN...

¶ 14. (C) After the imposition of the state of emergency, the chief of the armed forces, Seyran Ohanian, warned Armenians in a televised address not to gather - even in small groups - and said that his troops would react with severe authority to the " slightest" sign of public display of non-sanctioned gatherings. "I would like to warn all citizens that any attempt to organize or participate in events prohibited under the state of emergency would be adequately and strictly countered by the Armed Forces of the Republic of Armenia." Later, despite eyewitness accounts and video that readily contradict his claim, Ohanian said that army troops had not been involved in the March 1 crackdown; they allegedly had stayed back while police acted. However, a March 6 report from the National Security Service noted that 217 persons had received medical treatment after the crackdown: 41 civilians, 43 policemen and "133 military servicemen."

...AND POLICE DIDN'T FIRE AT DEMONSTRATORS

¶ 15. (C) While the Armed Forces Chief claimed military units had not participated in the crackdown, the GOAM claims the police also played a limited role. The Prosecutor General's spokesperson on March 6 said in a press briefing that law enforcement officers "had not fired in the direction of demonstrators," that they had only fired tracer bullets "into the air." However, video footage (now

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circulating on YouTube) shows police or soldiers firing their guns, and not into the air. (NOTE: To date we have heard that one person was killed by a stray bullet while standing on a balcony, and four others were killed by bullet wounds. END NOTE.) The GOAM has now claimed that this footage was "doctored" and has appealed to United Nations officials to investigate.

IT'S ALL THE FAULT OF THE PROTESTERS

¶ 16. (C) GOAM public statements consistently blame demonstrators for the violence on March 1, and claim that police entered Freedom Square only after receiving tips that demonstrators were assembling weapons. We, however, have heard credible suggestions that the assault on Freedom Square was premeditated. On March 12, Armenia's Mediamax Wire Service reported that the Special Investigative Service's Senior Investigator said that "in the process of preliminary investigation, it turned out that the mass unrest was planned and organized, was coordinated from a single center and was directed to destabilize the situation in the country." However, one of Kocharyan's advisers recently admitted to PolChief (Ref A) that Kocharyan planned by February 29 to clear out the demonstrators on March 1, thus lending credence to suggestions that police had in fact planted arms and explosives in order to have a pretext for staging the assault. This tracks with Kocharyan's boast to CDA on February 27 that he could "clear the square in 20 minutes."

BELIEVING YOUR OWN PR -- Part 1

¶ 17. (C) On March 6, during a cabinet meeting, PM Sargsian noted that ministers have been too "passive" in the provision

of objective information on the situation in the country to international organizations. He assured them that relevant official reports aired by Armenia's TV channels are "truthful" and can be cited as proven facts "without hesitation." In what might be his version of extending an olive branch, Sargsian also stated that "it is necessary to get involved in a dialogue, even if the interlocutor is 'blinded by hatred.'"

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BELIEVING YOUR OWN PR -- PART 2  
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¶18. (C) On March 7, President Kocharian's spokesman said that "the world is forming a clear idea of what was happening in Yerevan on March 1-2 in reality," and that meetings that week with DAS Matthew Bryza, EU Special Representative Peter Semneby and PACE Representative John Prescott in many respects assisted that process. "I am sure that, after getting familiar with the given chronology, no one will have doubts about what happened in Yerevan in reality."

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CLAIMING THE USG'S SUPPORT...  
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¶19. (C) After Deputy Assistant Secretary Matthew Bryza met with PM Sargsian on March 6, local media reporting of the meeting strongly implied that Bryza had agreed to the necessity of the state of emergency "as an instrument that helps ease tensions and leads processes towards a natural state of affairs."

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...OR MAYBE NOT  
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¶10. (C) However, the MFA on March 12 claimed to be "astonished" by Bryza's comments to the Associated Press (AP) following his visit to Armenia. "We're astonished that even after his visit to Yerevan, after meeting with and hearing from various official and unofficial sources, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matt Bryza would make such arbitrary statements," said MFA spokesman Tigran Balayan. "Assigning such one-sided blame is unfounded and not helpful. The number of wounded law enforcement officers (108) -- 43 of them wounded by firearms and hand grenades -- clearly demonstrates that rioters were in possession of firearms and explosives. That coincides with the operative information of law enforcement agencies which had informed the public about all this, days before the events of March 1. In that case,

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labeling the reaction of the government as 'a crackdown on opposition protests' or qualifying it as 'harsh and brutal' is incorrect. This was not at all an attack by policemen on civilians."

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OSCE/ODIHR AGAIN ENDORSES ELECTION  
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¶11. (C) After the initial OSCE/ODIHR report on the February 19 election called the election administration "mostly in line" with international standards, the GOAM widely and frequently claimed that ODIHR had called the election fair and democratic. It never mentioned all the concerns ODIHR cited. Many Western media outlets said essentially the same thing, perhaps confirming both the ambiguity of ODIHR's rating system and the cleverness of the GOAM's information campaign.

¶12. (C) Following last week's release of the latest interim ODIHR report, which provided a more extensive cataloguing of irregularities but no actual negative headline (ref B), the MFA on Monday claimed the report reaffirmed the original OSCE

conclusion. This was at best misleading, as the report only made reference to the initial finding -- which had just been about election administration -- and did not reaffirm it.

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SHE DIDN'T QUIT -- SHE WAS FIRED!  
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¶13. (C) On March 6, the GOAM reported that Sargsian had dismissed Hranush Kharatian as head of the Department on National Minorities and Religious Issues. As we reported Ref C, Post learned from Kharatian that she had resigned on March ¶13. There has been no other word of other possible resignations (or firings, as they might appear in the press) in the GOAM following the events of March 1.

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MEDIA RESTRICTIONS LIFTED...  
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¶14. (C) On March 10 President Kocharian lifted several elements of the State of Emergency, most notably political party activity. Media restrictions and bans on gatherings remain in place, however. On March 12, Kocharian said that he would soon "sign a decree on mitigating the limitations for the work of the media, implemented in connection with the state of emergency."

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... BUT ONLY OFFICIAL LIES PERMITTED  
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¶15. (C) On March 12 Kocharian pledged to ease restrictions on media operation, but warned the opposition not to stage any new protests while political tension remained high. "Now, under the state of emergency, we are telling you what you can do regarding the internal political situation. After signing the decree we will tell you what you can not do. Those restrictions will be very narrow. They will relate to provocative actions, the spread of overtly false information. All of you will be much freer to express your views and approaches, to report analyses and information in general."

¶16. (C) True to his word, on March 13, Kocharian modified Item 4 of the State of Emergency decree, which used to read: "The publications in the mass media on the issues of internal situation and state importance are to be restricted to official information provided by state entities only." It now reads, "It is banned for media outlets to publish or spread by any other means obviously false information on state and internal political issues, destabilizing information, urges to participate in unauthorized events." (Comment: The GOAM has not defined what constitutes false or destabilizing information, but it's safe to guess that it would include any information not consistent with the GOAM line, particularly with regard to the events of March 1-2. End Comment).

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HAS PRESIDENT BUSH CONGRATULATED YOU?  
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¶17. (C) Adding to nearly two weeks of GOAM prevarication, PM Sargsian appeared on public television the evening of March

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13 to answer 80 of the more than 3,000 questions that had been allegedly sent to him on his hastily-constructed live journal blog. During the two-hour program in which Sargsian sat in what appeared to be a wooden throne at the head of a table flanked by aides with their laptops, he proceeded to answer the questions put to him usually with terse one or two word replies and always touting the "established chronology" when discussing the events of March 1-2. One of the questions asked, "Has President Bush congratulated you yet on

your election victory?" Sargsian replied that President Bush had "already congratulated (him) when (he) became Prime Minister." A little knowledge of protocol and a quick look at our records proved this allegation to be patently false.

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COMMENT  
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¶18. (C) While some of the information provided by the GOAM's officially approved media sources may in fact be accurate, the GOAM has not yet let up on a campaign of demonstrated and blatant dishonesty in its media and public statements. We are concerned that some of these statements -- notably estimates of the number killed, the responsibility for the crackdown on March 1, and the conclusion of the ODIHR election report, among others -- have been repeated as established fact in some Western circles, something that will only encourage the GOAM to continue disseminating false information. Therefore, any assertions made by the GOAM prior to the unconditional lifting of media restrictions and the permitting of independent reporting and investigations should be viewed with extreme skepticism. END COMMENT.

PENNINGTON